

A

REVIEW

OF THE

STATE

OF THE

BRITISH NATION.

Saturday, August 18. 1711.

AS every Author is at Liberty to choose his own Subject when he Writes, so he must leave the Readers at Liberty, to dislike his Choice if they think fit; it cannot be expected that any Writer can keep his Head equally clear, and his Thoughts equally bright at all Times; and if they were so, unless the Readers Fancy and Taste were as exactly in Time, what is written shall not have at all Times the same Relish.

These Thoughts inclin'd me to a short disquisition on the most significant, little understood Qualification, we call DULLNESS; a Thing, of which I am of Opinion the

World is the most mistaken about, of any Thing that takes up so much of their Observation.

If I understand what is the general Acceptation of the Word, as it relates to Authors, a Man is call'd Dull, when there appears no Spirit, no Relish or Vivacity, in what he Writes; when his Style does not touch, when the Clearness and Perspicuity of his Expressions, the happy Turn in his Relations, the Fineness and Politeness of his Style, the Cadence and Musick of his Words, does not touch the Reader, surprize his Fancy, and fire his Imagination as he expects.

Now

Now my doubt concerning this Matter, and the mistake, which I think, the World generally runs into about it, lies here, Whether this DULLNESS, tho' charg'd upon the Author, is not rather to be found in the Reader than in the Writer.

The Taste is the Judge of Meats, but if the Palate be vitiated, no Cook can dress up his Sauce to please you ; in vain all the Savory and Relishing Things in the World are put together ; all the costly Rarities of ten Markets, the Spices, the Preserves, the Fruits of ten Climates cannot recommend themselves to a Mouth that has no Taste, the Delicacies of the Gardens, the hot Beds, and early Fruits are all of no signification, they have no Flavour, their Juices give no Refreshment, if the Palate be sour'd with a Disease.

What is all the Charms of Musick ; that Harmony of Sound and fineness of Stroke, that at another Time, or in another Person, would even raise the Spirits from the deepest Melancholly ; that Harp itself, that drove the Devil out of King *Saul*, to a Man that has no Ear, it is all discour'd, scream, and meer emptyness.

Carry the Distemper'd Brain, the untun'd Organ, the Man whose Soul has no Powers to act, all this is but DULL Stuff, the Reason is, they have no guess that Way.

When the late Glorious *Tattler* diverted the Town with his Wit, knowing that neither the Engine of his Fancy might be always in Tune, or the Bars of his hearers be always in Condition prepar'd for the Flats of his Performance, by directing them to believe, that when he was dull, he was so by design, and this was suppos'd necessary, either to Whet their Appetites, to Relish the better what might come after, or to show the Command he had over their Censures, that they were oblig'd to believe his Dulness had its Uses, and that he ought to be Dull when ever he pleased. But, with Submission, to his Contrivance, he had laid a much firmer Foundation against the Exception of future Ages, if he had order'd them, that whenever they

were tempted to think him DULL, they should take it for a Delusion upon their Understandings, and that it was not the Author, but themselves that were DULL ; it being laid down first as an Essential, that it was impossible for him to be Dull, and that therefore all the Dulness must be upon themselves, that could not Taste the Wit and Spirit of the Author ; that there was always a Flux of happy Fire and Spirit in the Author, and that their Dulness only hid it from their sight.

That this is the Case, is clear from many Examples ; How often do we find you differing in your Opinions about any Thing you hear ? One comes from the Church, and meets his Friend — *Tom*, says he, How did you like the Doctor ? I thought he made a most extraordinary Sermon, he is a clever Headed Ingenious Man, I thought I never heard a finer Discourse in my Life ; Pox o' your Dull Fancy, says *Tom*, I think he is the greatest Blockhead in the Town, I never heard such a dull piece of Stuff in my Life — Now where can this Mistake lie ? The Sermon had but one just Character, either it was a good Sermon, or it was not — Why both these Observers are mistaken, for the Man preach'd a good honest, plain, wholesome Sermon, a Discourse suited to his Auditory, and had not these two Critics I want-wit-hearers been there, it had been well enough ; but as on the one Hand it had little of Ingenuity or Fineness in it, so neither was it Dull or Contemptible ; but the Taste of the Hearers was the Test of the Sermon to them, and the Minister had the Praise or the Reproach of the Parish, not as what he deliver'd, really did or did not deserve, but as the Palate and Ear of the Auditory were in Tune to receive it.

The Famous Mr. *Milton* wrote two Poems, *Paradise lost*, and *Paradise regain'd*, which tho' form'd in the same Mould, the Work of the same bright Genius, yet have met with a most differing Reception in the World ; the first possess with a general Reputation for the greatest, best, and most sublime Work now in the *English Tongue*, and

and it would be to lessen a Man's own Reputation to say any Thing less of it —

The other is call'd a Dull Thing, infinitely short of the former, nothing to compare with it, and not like the same Author, and this is the Universal Opinion of the Age about these two Books: Mr. *Milton* was told this by several, for it was the Opinion then as well as now, and his Answer was this — Well, I see the Reason plainly, why this Book is not liked so well as the other, for I am sure it is the better Poem of the two, but People have not the same Gust of Pleasure at the regaining Paradise, as they have Concern at the loss of it, and therefore they do not relish this so well as they did the other, tho' it be without Compariſon the best Performance.

I remember we had two Party Authors, which vex'd the Town a-while, tho' lately they having scolded themselves out of Breath, and have left off; I mean the *Examiner* and the *Medley*; between these, nothing was more frequent (except giving one another the Lye, to their mutual Reputation) than to Reproach one another with DULLNESS, the Authors were Men of Wit enough on either side, and there is many other *Faux pas* to be found in them, rather than Dullness.

I observe we are apt to call several Things Dull, without respect to the merit of the Case.

1. Such Things as we do not love to hear.
2. Such Things as we do not understand.

Upon the whole, I would recommend it to all those, who are so fond of passing their Judgments about Authors and Writings, as to Dullness, that they will enquire, whether it is not their Dullness that read, if the Writer has his Flats and his Sharps, his dark and his bright Sides, his Hours and Critical Seasons, when he can write and when he cannot, so has the Reader; and whenever any Man cries out of the Dullness of such and such an Author; I cannot, I confess,

but be apt to think, that the Dullness is more in the Gentleman's Reading, since perhaps, it shall not be long, before some other Person shall come and admire for Wit, that very Performance, which the other in his abundance of Wit had censur'd for Dull.

Nay, I appeal to the modest Readers themselves, whether they have not thought a Thing Dull and Empty at one Time, which at another Time upon Revising, they have found to be full of Spirit and Brightness of thought; and what is the Reason of all this, but that their Fancy being Clouded and Dull at the first Time, they could not see or taste the Beauties and Excellencies, which now they are satisfied are to be found in the piece they despis'd.

DULLNESS being then to be equally divided between Reader and Writer, methinks the Arrogance of our reading Wits should be a little check'd by this Thought, when they who can write nothing themselves, take upon them to Censure every Thing that others write, and make themselves Judges of Wit, condemning not according to the Dullness of the Writers Judgment, but the Dullness of their own.

It was but a few Days ago I came into a Coffee-House, and I saw a Gentleman nodding over the *Spectator*, What have you got there said I to him, after I had wak'd him; the *Spectator*, says he, he's Damnable DULL to Day; I went on to talk of other Business to him, and by and by I was for taking the *Spectator* out of his Hand to read it — Hold, says he, I han't read it myself — Yet he could tell it was very Dull — That is to say he was very sleepy, and could not relish what he read — Well, having had his nap out, he read it over, and I perceiv'd him laughing to himself — What tickles you now, says I, D——n him says he, this *Spectator* would make any Body laugh, he is a very witty Fellow — Now the Case is plain, the Man was a wake; before, when his Head was Dull, the *Spectator* was damnable Dull, but when his own Wits were in Action, then the *Spectator* had a great deal of Wit.

From

From this Observations, I make these short Remarks.

1. Let an Author keep his Senses waking when he writes, he will always be best liked by those, whose Senses are awake when they read.
2. Authors should never Value what Men say of their Writings, when they are sleepy and dull, if they that are awake approve them.

3. The Duller we are when we read, the apter we are to call every Thing we read Dull.
4. Every Reader ought to Enquire when he reads, whether he is awake, and able to distinguish between the Dullness of the Writer and his own.
5. Things are generally dull or bright, rather in proportion to the Dullness and Quickness of him that reads, than of him that writes.

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Printed for and sold by John Baker at the Black-Boy
Pater-Noster-Row. 1711.